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Fears for the Contras

A The year-long struggle by Constantine Menges to survive as a National Security Council staffer ended Monday with his summary dismissal while alarm bells on Nicaragua he had set off sounded all over Washington.

It was Menges who alerted conservatives that Philip Habib, special envoy on Central America, had painted President Reagan into a corner over aid to contra guerrillas. That service may make Menges a hero on the right, but it brought comments of good riddance within the national security bureaucracy. Only a written appeal Monday by Menges averted plans to change his office locks and cut up his White House pass.

Locking out a Reaganite from the NSC staff would explain a current phenomenon in Washington. Pro-contra members of Congress have not truly been reassured by renewed pledges from administration officials, ranging up to Ronald Reagan, of support for the anticommunist resistance in Nicaragua. Misgivings of a sellout persist.

Until his dismissal Monday, Menges was one of two NSC senior staffers (out of 16) associated with the 1980 Reagan campaign. Eleven of them, headed by Adm. John Poindexter (a regular Navy officer serving as national security adviser), are career government employees.

Poindexter is a hard-line anticommunist, but simply could not tolerate Menges' activities outside the bureaucracy. Although punctilious in never dealing with the press, Menges maintained conservative contacts on Capitol Hill and elsewhere. He was eased out last summer as the NSC's Latin American affairs director and shifted to "public diplomacy."

That kept Menges out of policy making, but he remained so nettlesome that Poindexter wanted him out entirely. Simultaneously, Menges spread the alarm of Ambassador Habib's April 11 letter to Democratic congressmen. Although the State Department has insisted the letter contained "nothing new," it departed from past policy by pledging disbanding of the contras "from the date of signature" of a Contadora treaty between the Sandinista regime and its neighbors.

Thus, the congressional right over the past two weeks has engaged in a two-track campaign to influence the president. The first track, saving Menges, was hopeless from the start. To think that Reagan would even consider overruling a personnel decision by his NSC director betrays total misunderstanding of how this president delegates authority.

The other track, getting Reagan to save the contras, resulted from Menges' alarm. Rep. Dan Burton predictably got nowhere with a letter asking the president for a meeting with concerned GOP congressmen. But one of its signers,

Rep. Jack Kemp, raised the issue by departing from the agenda May 12 at the weekly meeting between the president and Republican leaders.

Reagan reassured Kemp that there was no chance of withdrawing U.S. support from the contras. He said the same thing in a May 15 meeting with Sen. Jesse Helms.

The week ended May 16 with a secret NSC session presided over by the president. According to reports reaching Capitol Hill, nobody supported Habib after his 20-minute argument for a Contadora-type solution.

According to White House sources, Helms on his Oval Office visit handed the president a letter proposing that he "undo the grave harm caused by Ambassador Habib's letter." Using language similar to Rep. Burton's, the senator proposed that Reagan inform Central American presidents the United States "will not undertake a military rescue of their people" and "substantially reduce" their economic aid if they endorse a "false political settlement" in Nicaragua.

Until the president takes that line, conservatives will be tormented by questions such as these: Why was Raymond Burghardt, Menges' successor at the NSC, sent last week to Central America to perfect the Contadora agreement, whose conclusion would doom the contras? Why was hard-liner Abrams dispatched Sunday to the Soviet Union for consultations on Central America, removing him from action at this climactic moment? And why was Constantine Menges, not Phil Habib, given his pink slip Monday morning?

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